



Dominique Dawes

(1976-)

First African-American on the U.S. gymnastic team. First African-American female gymnast to win an individual Olympic gymnastic medal

Dominique Dawes was born in Silver Spring, Maryland in 1976. She became involved in gymnastics when she was a child. When Dawes' parents saw their daughter flipping around the house, swinging from doorways, and tumbling over furniture, they thought that it would be a good idea to enroll her in a gym. They took her to Hill's Gymnastics Training Center in Gaithersburg, Maryland, when she was six years old. There, she would meet the person who would coach her through all her career as a gymnast, Kelli Hill. "We knew from the day she walked in the door that she was an athlete," Hill told to a local newspaper in 1994. "Not only the physical talent was there," Hill remembered, but Dawes had "more heart and soul" for the sport that any other athlete that Hill had ever coached.

Dawes started competing when she was 9 years old. At 12, she attended her first international competition in Australia. Dawes began competing with the United States Senior National Team in 1991 and was a member of the 1992 Olympic Team that won the Bronze Medal in the Olympic Games in Barcelona. At the age of 15, Dawes was the first African American woman to represent the United States in women's gymnastics at an Olympic Games. "I think it was a great honor, and I'm proud I was the first," Dawes recalled later. In 1993, Dawes placed fourth in the all-round at the World Championships in Birmingham, England, while winning silver medals in the uneven bars and balance beam. In 1994, she swept the National Gymnastics Championships winning the all around crown and all four event titles, becoming the first woman in 25 years to sweep the national championships and only the second woman in history to achieve the feat. "It's kind of neat that it's been done one time before," Dawes acknowledged to a local newspaper after her victory. "I never imagined I would win all the events." Dawes repeated this victory two years later, after an injury kept her from competing in the 1995 World Championships. At the 1996 U.S. National Championships, she again won all four individual event finals. No other female gymnast had ever swept the finals twice. Dawes also participated in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. She earned two medals. In addition to being part of the Gold Medal Team, she also won the Bronze Medal in the floor exercise. She became the first African-American female gymnast to win an individual Olympic gymnastic medal.

In addition to being a four-time World Championship Team Member and a two-time Olympian, she has received many titles and honors during her career. In 1993, she was USA Gymnastics Athlete of the Year, and in 1994, she was named Sportsperson of the Year by USA Gymnastics. Also in 1994, she was a finalist for the AAU Sullivan Award which recognizes the USA's top amateur athlete. Dawes was the 1995 recipient of the Arch McDonald Award presented by the Touchdown Club of Washington, D.C. She also was awarded the 1995 McDonald's Balancing It All! Award and the 1995 Henry P. Iba Citizen Athlete Award, presented annually to two outstanding athletes who have demonstrated good citizenship.

Known by her teammates and coach as “Awesome Dawesome,” Dawes worked very hard to combine practice and regular life. While attending Gaithersburg High School, Dawes trained almost 40 hours a week, going to the gym before and after school for several hours daily. Despite her rigorous training schedule, she maintained a high grade point average, was a member of her high school’s honor roll, and was able to participate in school activities. She was the Queen at her senior prom. Her commitment and dedication to her sport required certain sacrifices in her personal life. The year before the Barcelona Olympics, Dawes moved in with her coach in Gaithersburg, spending the weekdays at Hill’s home to eliminate the 40 minute commute from her family’s home in Silver Spring to the Gaithersburg gym where she practiced twice a day.

After the 1996 Olympics, Dawes decided to attend the University of Maryland. Retired from sports as a competitor, Dawes decided to pursue a career in acting, modeling and television production, although still planning to continue her college education. She has appeared in the Broadway hit Grease, in the Disney television show The Jersey, and in a MTV music video with Prince in the remake version of the old Motown standard Betcha By Golly Wow. The comments of her coach, Kelli Hill, summarized Dawes personal and professional journey. “I’ve trained with her since she began” practicing gymnastics, Hill commented to a local newspaper, and “it’s been absolutely wonderful to watch a little girl grow up to become such a mature young lady.”

SOURCES:

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- www.usa-gymnastics.org/athletes/bios/d/ddawes.html
- www.mag7.net/dawes/dawes.html